

Silver Medal Winner
Columbus Circle
New York, New York



Photos: Olin Partnership

This is an excerpt from:

Building Sustainable Neighborhoods

THE 2007 RUDY BRUNER AWARD FOR URBAN EXCELLENCE



BRUNER FOUNDATION, INC.

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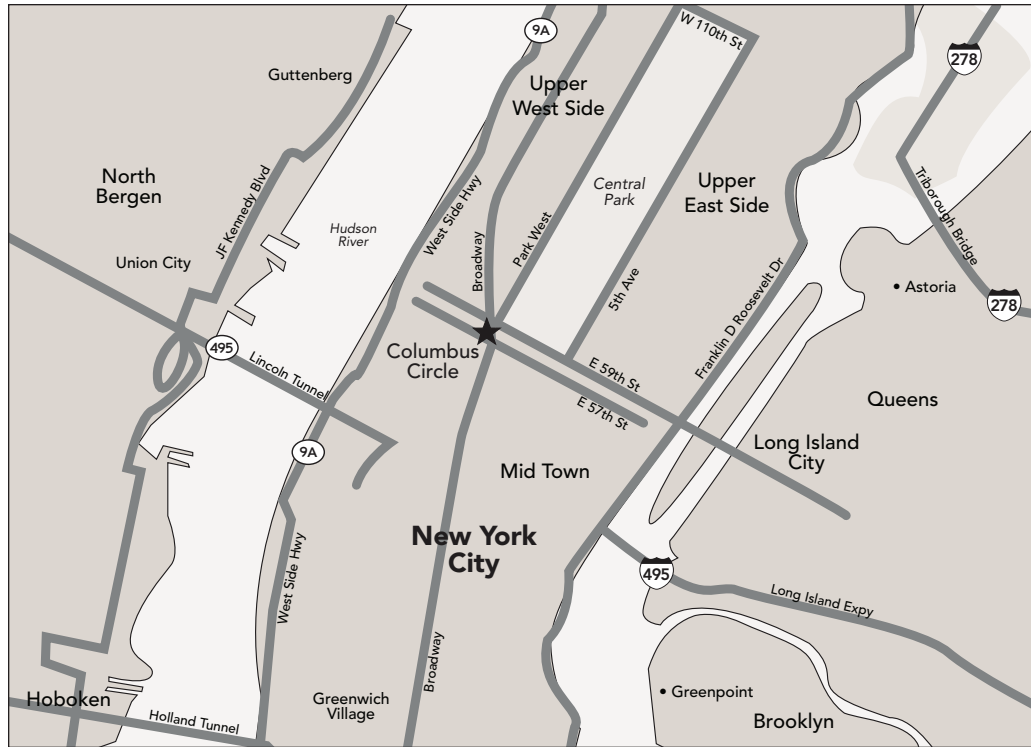
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Columbus Circle

At-A-Glance

WHAT IS COLUMBUS CIRCLE?

- ❖ The redesign of an historic traffic circle on the southwest corner of Frederick Law Olmsted's Central Park in New York City;
 - ❖ An addition to the public realm of New York and a pedestrian destination in a busy and complex urban intersection;
 - ❖ A new urban park connecting Central Park to pedestrian traffic on Eighth Avenue, Broadway, and 59th Street in New York;
 - ❖ A 225,000-square-foot transportation hub designed to accommodate subway transit, automotive, and pedestrian needs. (Below ground, the IND and IRT subway lines criss-cross the site with related stations still under renovation in the adjacent Time Warner Center and between Time Warner Center and the Trump Hotel);
 - ❖ The forecourt of the new Time Warner Center, the Central Park Merchants' Gate entrance, and the Two Columbus Circle structures to be occupied by the Museum of Art and Design;
- ❖ A new context for the 40-foot-high marble monument to Christopher Columbus sculpted by Gaetano Russon and dedicated on October 12, 1892;
 - ❖ A reconfiguration of subterranean infrastructure involving a complex mix of public and private utilities.

PROJECT GOALS

- ❖ To establish the Circle as a significant and unique asset to the public realm of New York City;
- ❖ To reconstruct Columbus Circle as a transportation resource and maintain its ability to move 60,000 cars per day through a complex intersection during construction;
- ❖ To improve pedestrian circulation to the facilities and spaces that surround the Circle;
- ❖ To make a beautiful and eye-catching place that is easy to maintain and keep clean and safe;
- ❖ To integrate all of the above in a manner that respects the role of the Circle as a setting for the monument to Columbus, as the Merchants' Gate entrance to Central Park, and as a critical connector between Mid-town and Up-town Manhattan.

Project Chronology

THE FIRST 100 YEARS (1868 TO 1968)

1868 Land is cleared to develop a large circular entrance to Central Park consistent with the intent of Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux.

1870 Circle at 8th Ave entrance to Central Park is approved. The actual traffic circle is designed by William P. Eno, a businessman responsible for much innovation in traffic control and road safety.

1892 The monument to Christopher Columbus, designed by Gaetano Russo, is dedicated and placed in the center of the Circle.

1900 A drive entrance to Central Park is added to the Circle.

1904 The IRT Subway is constructed.

1912 The Maine Memorial at Merchants' Gate is constructed, memorializing the loss of life when the Battleship Main was

1997
Olin Partnership enters Metropolitan Arts Society competition for Columbus Circle.

1998
City selects Vollmer Assoc with Mcobb and Assoc. for redesign.

2002
Community groups and Related Properties object to city sponsored design and return to Olin Partnership.

2003
Bids for Olin Partnership design received and accepted. Construction begins for current design.

2004
Time Warner Center opens.

2005
Columbus Circle Urban Plaza completed.

sunk. The Memorial is designed by H. Van Buren Magonigle with sculpture by Attilio Piccirilli.

1930s The IND Subway is constructed, completing the major IRT/IND transfer point at the Circle.

1941 240 Central Park South is constructed according to the architectural design of Mayer and Whittlesey.

1949 The Rotary is added to Columbus Circle.

1953 Forty-four buildings are demolished to make way for the Coliseum as part of New York's Urban Renewal Program.

1956 The Coliseum at 10 Columbus Circle is designed by the architectural team of Eggers and Higgins, John B. Peterkin, Leon and Lionel Levy, Aymar Embury Jr as a new convention center is constructed.

1964 The Edward Durrell Stone design, for what was then the Gallery of Modern Art at 2 Columbus Circle, is constructed. By 1973 the building is occupied by the city's Department of Cultural Affairs and the Convention and Visitors Bureau.

1965 A fountain surrounding the monument to Columbus, designed by Douglas Leigh, and a decorative fence surrounding the island supporting the monument were installed as a gift of the Delacorte Foundation.

CONTEMPORARY (1982-2005)

1982 The completion of a Midtown Zoning Study leads to the Coliseum site being "up-zoned." This, in turn, results in new traffic studies proposing a return to a rotary by Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill.

1985 RFP issued for Coliseum site and subway improvements. MTA selects Moshe Safdie and Boston Properties.

1987 Municipal Arts Society, New York City Parks Council and adjacent Community Boards file a lawsuit against the Coliseum Project claiming the MTA sold development rights in violation of the zoning regulations.

1988 Hanna/Olin prepares feasibility study for Central Park Conservancy to redesign and transform Columbus Circle.

1989 The lawsuit resulted in an agreement that included reducing the height and bulk of the proposed building.

1994 Boston Properties defaults on payment for the MTA site.

1995 Trump International Hotel and Tower conversion reconfigures office development into luxury apartments and hotel complex.

1996-97 Coliseum site RFP is issued by the MTA, with nine proposals received in 1997.

1996-97 2 Columbus Circle site RFP is issued by the NYC Economic Development Corporation, with seven proposals received in 1997.

1997 Merchants' Gate, Central Park is redesigned and reconstructed.

1997 Metropolitan Arts Society conducts a competition inviting six prominent designers to propose solutions for the Circle design. The Olin Partnership enters in collaboration with Machado and Silvetti.

1998 Metropolitan Transportation Authority awards site to The Related Companies for new Time Warner Headquarters, jazz hall, hotel, and apartments.

1998 New York City Department of Design and Construction selects Vollmer Associates as lead consultant for redesigning Columbus Circle with the design firm of McCobb and Associates.

2000 The Coliseum is demolished.

2002 Resistance to concepts by McCobb and Associates from community groups, civic organizations, and community boards leads to Related Properties offering resources to support the city engagement of the Olin Partnership working with Vollmer Associates continuing from their initial selection in 1998.

2003 Bids for construction of the Circle are accepted in February, and construction begins in July of the same year.

2004 2.8 million-square-foot Time Warner Center opens.

2005 Columbus Circle project completed.

KEY PARTICIPANTS INTERVIEWED

Design Practitioners:

LAURIE OLIN, Principal, The Olin Partnership

BRIAN O'CONNELL, Principal, Vollmer Associates

CLAIRE KAHN TUTTLE, Associate, WET Design

PHILLIP HABIB, Phillip Habib & Associates and Adjunct Professor,
Polytechnic University

Other members of the professional design and consulting team that were not interviewed include:

TULLY CONSTRUCTION, General Contractor

AMMANN & WHITNEY, Resident Engineer Inspector

L'OBSERVATOIRE INTERNATIONAL, Lighting Design

LYNCH & ASSOCIATES, Irrigation Designer

COSENTINI ASSOCIATES, M-E-P Engineer

WDF, Plumbing Contractor
HELLMAN ELECTRIC, Electrical Contractor
PROFESSIONAL PAVERS, Paving
GARDEN CITY IRRIGATION & MAINTENANCE SERVICES, Landscape Irrigation

Public Officials:

GALE A. BREWER, New York City Council Member, 6th District,
Manhattan
EVANS DOLEYRES, Assistant Deputy Commissioner,
NYC Department of Design and Construction
AMANDA BURDEN, Chair, NYC Planning Commission and
Director of the Department of City Planning
ADRIAN BENEPE, Commissioner, NYC Department of Parks
and Recreation
ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER JOSHUA LAIRD, NYC Department of
Parks and Recreation
ETHEL SHEFFER, Chair of the Tri-Community Board committee
on Columbus Circle

Private/ Not For Profit Participants:

MONICA BLUM, President, Lincoln Square Business
Improvement District
KENT BARWICK, President, Municipal Arts Society
BRUCE WARWICK, Vice Chairman, The Related Companies
DOUG BLONSKY, President and Central Park Administrator,
The Central Park Conservancy
CHRIS NOLAN, Vice President for Capitol Projects and
Chief Landscape Architect, The Central Park Conservancy



Photo: Olin Partnership

Project Description



Aerial view of plaza.

Columbus Circle is best understood as a project that fully integrates the complexity of planning, design, engineering, construction, and management in Manhattan. What is most telling is that no single actor controlled all the elements of the project. Rather, the project emerged from:

- the legacy of Olmsted and Vaux's aspirations for the Circle at the corner, dating back to 1868;
- years of controversy about the up-zoning of the Coliseum site into what is now the Time Warner Center;
- the practical necessity and creative designs for vehicular traffic control in a complex intersection at the southwest corner of Central Park;
- the legacy of William H. Whyte's understanding of what makes great urban public space;
- the strength of a well-regarded landscape architecture professional;
- clear and strongly stated public policy on the design development of the circle.

It would be easy to make heroes in the execution of the project, but that would oversimplify the reality of multiple actors engaged in thoughtful and creative ways. Design inquiry, municipal planning direction, and problem solving all converged in the project to redesign Columbus Circle.

DESIGN INQUIRY

Kent Barwick, as President of the Municipal Arts Society (MAS), created an environment supportive of design inquiry through a MAS-sponsored design competition on the Circle. In 1997 the MAS, with its design competition, presented a variety of alternatives to the controversial Circle design proposal that had been offered as part of plans to renovate the Merchants' Gate at Central Park. These new discussions about the future possibilities of the site allowed for consideration of a "stand-alone" circle and different ways to think about public access to the space. The Related Companies showed same spirit of inquiry as the developer of the Time Warner Center when they hired the Olin Partnership and contributed the Partnership fees to the project. They also hired Phillip Habib & Associates, who convinced the Department of Transportation to do full-scale tests of the rotary concepts at the Circle, to identify how many lanes were required to keep traffic moving. This assessment determined the remaining available space for the "island" that the Olin Partnership had to work with. Olin engaged WET Design as the fountain designer and employed a subtle approach to "fountain as background," in contrast to the "fountain as center attraction," an approach they had used successfully in the Fountains of Bellagio in Las Vegas.

MUNICIPAL PLANNING DIRECTION

This project was advanced by strong expressions of interest by both Mayors Giuliani and Bloomberg. To be sure, both leaders saw the site as a serious traffic problem that had plagued that corner of Central Park for decades. The level of investment surrounding the circle during the 1990s leading up to the construction of the Time Warner Center also drew their attention. These investments included The Trump International Hotel and Tower on the Circle between Broadway and Central Park West, The Merchants' Gate restoration at the southwest entrance to Central Park, and new office and hotel complex development between Central Park South and Broadway. All such development demanded a proper front or foyer to give them a better address. That interest was reinforced by Commissioner Adrian Benepe at the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation (the landlord) and his Deputy Commissioner for Capital Projects, Amy Freitag. Many give Joseph Rose (Chair of the New York City



Photo: Olin Partnership

Lunch time plaza users.

Planning Commission under Mayor Giuliani) and Amanda Burden (appointed to that post by Mayor Bloomberg) kudos for municipal leadership on the project. Rose is often credited with advancing the concept of returning the space to a circle, and Burden pressed hard for the details that make public space successful, right down to the width of the benches. Benches were made wide enough to sit on both sides, “back to back,” in a way that connects the user to the social interior or to the perimeter landscape and skyline. Places to sit throughout the Circle make it a great place to watch people passing through, have a good conversation, or view a music or puppet theatre performance against the backdrop of the monument to Columbus. Burden, formerly an intern under William Whyte at Projects for Public Spaces, is a strong advocate for a quality public realm and reinforced Laurie Olin on the importance of basic principles.



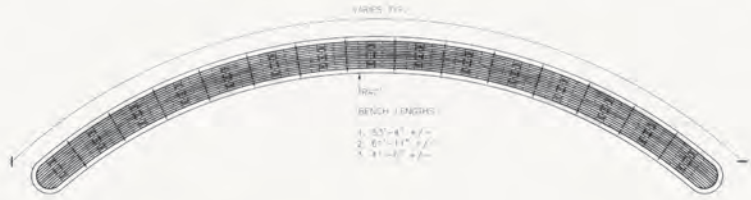
Photo: Olin Partnership

Use of plaza benches.

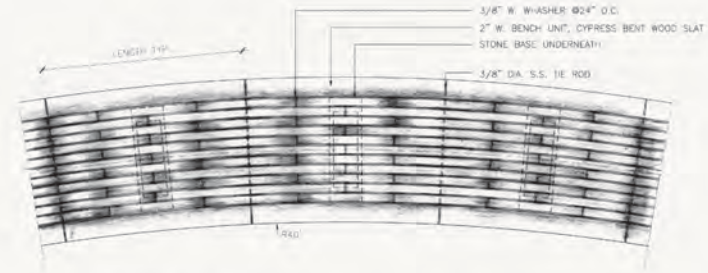
PROBLEM SOLVING AND CONSTRUCTION

Given the complexity of the traffic coming into the Circle from five directions and the range of new investments that sprang up throughout the 1990s, there was serious pressure to address the attendant traffic problems. By 1998 an interim solution was developed that realigned the Circle between Broadway and Central Park West all the way to Broadway west of Central Park. This work made a semicircular central island with five to six travel lanes and complex turn lanes. Pedestrian movement included a fair amount of jay-walking. As rezoning work related to the Coliseum began to look more promising, the New York City Department of Design and Construction (NYCDDC) did a “temporary” full-scale test of the rotary concept with Jersey barriers and minimal landscape that lasted from 1998 to 2003, with only minor variations. These years of investigating and experiencing the success of the interim solution led NYCDDC and the New York City Department of Transportation (NYCDOT), as well as the city’s Department of Parks and Recreation (NYCDPR), to conclude a full rotary solution could work. The installation proved to be so successful it provided the interim circulation around the Circle in advance of and during construction.

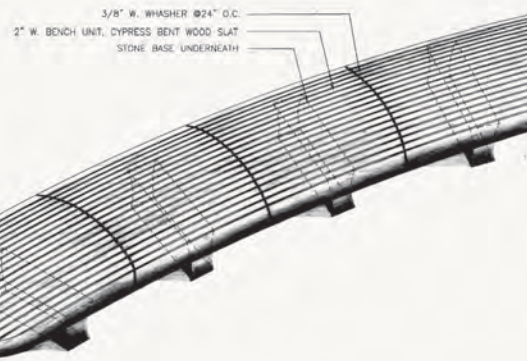
Other disciplined problem-solving on the project included the testing of landscape materials by the Central Park Conservancy, the



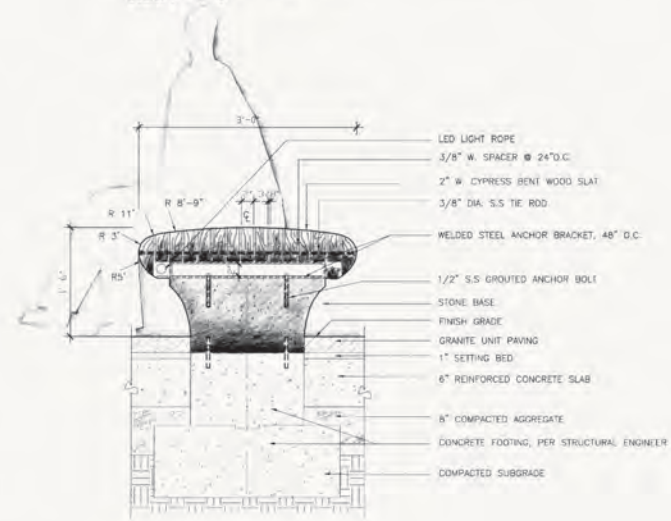
Bench Design - Overall Plan
Scale: 1/4" = 1' - 0"



Bench Design - Enlarged Plan
Scale: 1" = 1' - 0"



Bench Design - Isometric
Scale: 1/4" = 1' - 0"



Bench Design - Detail
Scale: 1 1/2" = 1' - 0"

Drawing: Olin Partnership

Details of plaza bench design.

integration of a number of construction trades involved in several different construction projects, and the management of high volumes of traffic throughout the construction of the new circle. Landscape materials testing led to the selection of low-maintenance planting material suited to the harshness of a site surrounded by such high traffic volumes. Benches of milled IPE wood and off-the-shelf lighting were integrated into the landscape. The construction management approach had to deal with concurrent infrastructure relocations below grade including electric, telecommunications, sewer, gas, water, steam, and the renovation of subsurface transit facilities and road reconstruction. All this was occurring in the relatively small space under the Circle while the Circle itself was under construction and while multiple projects surrounding the site were also under construction. All of this was, of course, made more difficult by the fact that 60,000 vehicles a day moved through the Circle without interruption throughout the eighteen months of construction. Finally, all of this problem-solving included phased completion of the work arranged to meet the needs of the 2004 opening of the Time Warner Center and addressed major events like the Macy's and Thanksgiving Day Parades.

LOCATION AND HISTORY

The First Circle

Columbus Circle has its roots in the Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux conception of a circle form for the southwest entrance to Central Park and in the initial land clearance driven by that intent in 1868. By 1870, the Circle as the 8th Avenue entrance to the park was approved and the original circle was designed, not by Olmsted or even by a design or engineering professional, but by an inventor and businessman, William P. Eno. It was Eno, some thirty years later, who would be credited with the origin, codification, and popularization of modern traffic control systems, including signage, hand signals, driving licenses, safety inspections for vehicles, and speed limits. In 1903 he authored New York City's first traffic code. It is fitting that William Eno was the first designer of the Circle, given the importance that traffic flows and pedestrian and vehicular safety came to occupy.

It was not until 1892 that Columbus Circle was officially named, with the dedication of Gaetano Russo's Christopher Columbus monument on the 400th anniversary of the explorer's landing in the new world. The complex intersection has, since its creation, struggled to achieve balance between traffic movement, pedestrian safety, access to the circle itself, and creation of a well-designed addition to the public realm of the city.



The Monument and the Circle

Soon after the dedication and placement of the monument to Christopher Columbus in 1892, the Circle began to be a reference point for measuring distances to New York City. For years Columbus Circle was called “ground zero” for New York City before that term took on another meaning on September 11, 2002. Even when the Circle was described as an awful place of traffic and motorcycle parking, a “black hole,” the monument itself was a key vista seen on the axis along 8th Ave, Broadway, Central Park West, and Central Park South, in addition to the path systems in Central Park. While visible, however, it has been surrounded by traffic and unsafe to visit for most of its history.

In 1965, a fountain was placed around the monument, along with a decorative fence, again with no safe way across multiple lanes of traffic. Without pedestrian access the space around the monument was only useful as a place to be viewed from the sidewalks and from the surrounding buildings. It was not a place to visit. Prior to the current design for Columbus Circle, the place was never a successful public space.

Historic postcards of Columbus Circle.



Photo: Olin Partnership

URBAN CONTEXT

The current design of Columbus Circle is the product of multiple design explorations by several designers and engineers and is influenced by a number of contextual forces, leading to:

- the sizing of the island;
- its current section involving a four-foot berm surrounding, in concentric circles, a tiered fountain, plaza, and the monument in the center;
- the addition of key access points to the Circle cut through the berm in three locations.

The contextual forces include a long and storied controversy about the urban renewal of the land southwest of the site of the Circle, between W. 58th Street and W. 60th Street. It is here at 10 Columbus Circle that the Coliseum designed by Leon and Lionel Levy was completed in 1953 and demolished in 2000 to make room for much denser 2.8 million-square-foot development in what is now the Time Warner Center.

View of plaza fountain.

Columbus Circle is surrounded by other well known venues, including The Trump International Hotel and Tower at One Central Park West, the Merchant's Gate entry to Central Park, the renovated the former Gallery of Modern Art designed by Edward Durrell Stone, and, of course, the Time Warner Center.

Perhaps more important to the size and approach to the design of the Circle was the real estate below ground. A congested array of public and private utilities had to be relocated to position a large computer and pump vault supporting the fountain system. This was a complicated process, since the space below the surface is very



Photo: Olin Partnership

Aerial view of plaza.



tight, and the necessary utilities included electric wires, subway control systems, steam and water pipes, and, immediately below, the Columbus Circle subway station (at one point the space is so tight that the floor of the circle is also the ceiling of the station).

Columbus Circle plaza construction.



PLANNING

It is difficult to tell the story of the Circle without some discussion of the planning context that supported its redevelopment. For example, just days prior to September 11, 2001, the loans were negotiated for the \$1.8 billion Time Warner Center. This occurs after almost twenty years of contentious efforts to replace the Coliseum and increase zoning density on site. The early work involved a lawsuit by the Municipal Arts Society, Parks Council, and adjacent Community Boards, with the central premise that the city was essentially selling development rights in violation of the zoning regulations. Parties to the suit, thus engaged, followed the progress over the full twenty years through multiple design iterations for the Coliseum site.

The lawsuit became a vehicle through which various stakeholders became aware of the potential in this space. Building a constituency willing to pursue the suit required a lot of discussion on the alternative vision for the area, the role of the Circle in this vision, and the complexity of achieving such a vision. In the variety of design explorations leading up to the construction of Time Warner Center, for example, there was public concern about the shadows any development would throw across the Merchant's Gate and into

Time Warner Center.

Central Park. One protest prior to the split tower scheme of TWC involved a public demonstration of hundreds of people with black umbrellas arrayed in Central Park to illustrate the shadow that the single tall tower would cast. Other groups of interested parties watched the development of the design for the Merchants' Gate at Central Park and a related scheme for the Circle. This effort led to the restoration of the Merchant's Gate but a rejection of a circle design that was seen to be inconsistent with the character of the gate and the importance of this entrance to Central Park.

The Related Companies, developer of Time Warner Center, saw it in their best interest to get the Circle completed and in use as the front yard to their very high-end development, so they hired what they described as "one of the leading landscape architects in the world" (Laurie Olin) to complete the project. Olin had participated in the earlier competition on the circle managed by MAS. He had partnered with the firm of Machado and Silvetti to produce a scheme that introduced elements that were included in the final design. Primary among these are the berm and a new fountain that is separate from the monument. The scheme also sought to connect the plaza to the subway below to enliven the park still more. For instance, current work on the subway station will turn the stairway to the platform 180 degrees so that exiting riders will directly face the circle. Even though the Olin Partnership was actually contracted by DDC, Related paid its fees.



Drawing: Olin Partnership



All of this work was facilitated by Mayors Giuliani and Bloomberg and their respective Planning Commissioners, Joseph Rose and Amanda Burden. At the same time it was watched by three Community Boards in the form of Ethel Sheffer's three-board Committee on Columbus Circle, a group that represented the interests of Board 7 on the Upper West Side, Board 5 in Midtown and Board 4 in Clinton and Hell's Kitchen. They followed all the iterations of development on and around the Circle for most of twenty years, heard dozens of presentations, and had a voice in the final circle design.

DESIGN

Like the original design by Eno, the new Columbus Circle offers some innovations in traffic and pedestrian flow management. Unlike Eno, however, it uses signals in a circular form of traffic control

*Left: Landscape architect Laurie Olin.
Right: Early sketch by Olin.*



Sketch: Olin Partnership

normally associated with the absence of traffic signals. The wide street and high-speed traffic requires the design to bring pedestrians up to the Circle via intermediate islands, where they can then enter into the Circle itself through the three entryways. The design thus provides a safe and well-protected public fountain and park in the middle of a very busy and complex traffic intersection.

The project scope involved 225,000-square feet of construction. The streets continued to handle 60,000 vehicles a day while the project relocated both privately and publicly owned utilities, waterproofed subway tunnel roofs, constructed a new vault for fountain electronics and pumps, reinforced the foundations of the monument to Columbus, built the plaza and fountain, landscaped the perimeter of the circle, and rebuilt the streets and curbs. This was done in coordination with work on the outer circle by others, and in coordination with nearby subway station renovations.



Plan: Olin Partnership

Section and Plan drawings by Olin Partnership.



Photos: Olin Partnership

The landscape design is a simple geometric system of concentric circles reinforced by curved paving patterns in the plaza, curved benches, ring lighting under the benches, a curved fountain surrounding the plaza, curved water spouts, and a four-foot high berm with thin, curved lighting and landscape plantings and hardy Buckeye trees. The benches are 36 inches wide, allowing people to sit back to back either facing the monument or the fountain. They curve in to support conversation and curve out to allow for more contemplative seating. People sit on the benches and watch people on or in the fountain or on the monument. There is a double row of honey locust trees in the outer edge of the traffic circle that further reinforces the “pebble-in-pond” (extending concentric circles) metaphor. This is repeated in the set of stainless steel bollards in front of the Time Warner Building itself, which are shaped and sized for sitting while also providing protection from surrounding traffic.

The fountains, created by WET Design, provide two levels of sound screen water features behind the four-foot berm that surrounds the public plaza. When the fountain is off there are three tiers of black

granite steps suitable for sitting in amphitheater arrangement. When it is on the tiered fountain, water falls on the granite steps and drops two jets into the pool all the way around the Circle. The Lincoln Square Business Improvement District program’s events in the square take full advantage of this geometry, turning off the water for presentations in the amphitheatre.

Laurie Olin describes the Circle as a unique public space. It is at the nexus of multiple street intersections tamed by the Circle and access points that reinforce its identity as a place for people to meet. It is small enough for people to easily find each other and pleasant enough to enjoy the wait. The Circle is a place that is on the way to jazz (“Jazz at Lincoln Center” in the Time Warner Building), or to the Whole Foods Store at Time Warner Center, to Central Park, to the new museum in the restored 2 Columbus Circle building, and many other points of interest in the immediate area.

Olin also stresses the importance of creating an enclosure to protect people from the traffic, despite the need for access in three places – Central Park South, Broadway, and off-axis on 8th Avenue – to create access to and movement through the plaza. This open and closed set of gestures has, according to Olin and several other informants, put Columbus Circle back in the mental map of New Yorkers and tourists alike. “It is,” Olin said, “not the edge of Central Park; it is its own thing.”

Views of Columbus Circle Plaza.

The design of the Circle has been recognized by a number of awards programs in addition to the Bruner Award, including:

- The American Society of Landscape Architects, with their 2006 General Design Award of Honor;
- The American Society of Landscape Architects, Pennsylvania/Delaware Valley Chapter, 2006 Design/Build Award of Merit;
- New York Construction News, Project of the Year, 2005;
- The American Council of Engineering Companies of New York's 2006 Diamond Award.



Photo: Olin Partnership

Christopher Columbus monument.

When one listens to the wide variety of participants involved in the development of Columbus Circle, it is clear that the complexity of the project has been masked by the simplicity and clarity of the solution. The circle itself, the pedestrian access points in the middle of the street, the fountain surrounding and making space instead of being an object in the space, the backless benches, the efficiency and density of the underground utilities, the low mound enabling those sitting to mask the busy surrounding and those standing to be seen and be seen, are all synthesized in what appears to be a virtually inevitable composition. The team made it look easy, but it clearly was not.

OPERATIONS: CENTRAL PARK CONSERVANCY

Funding to sustain adequate maintenance has been a point of contention. While the Central Park Conservancy (CPC) has accepted responsibility for the maintenance of Columbus Circle, their estimate of the operation and maintenance costs is \$490,000 per year. It currently operates with modest supplemental resources from the Time Warner Center Condo Association which promises a larger contribution. The project was executed under the assumption that resources for operations and maintenance would emerge. Central Park Conservancy currently reports it is continuing discussions with the Department of Parks and with Related in its search for a sustainable source of support. The Conservancy's summary of



operations and maintenance costs (below) provides for staff coverage of the circle from 7 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., seven days a week.

Complaints have emerged about maintenance, but they are tempered with an understanding that the operations budget has not been given adequate resources. As a result, the planting program is not as rich and varied as some would like, and trash removal relies upon volunteers and sporadic help from the local business improvement district or Time Warner Center staff. The leadership of CPC believes it is just a matter of time before agreements are reached on the required support. CPC was clearly given responsibility for maintenance and operation of the Circle, but, in their view, this task came without sufficient funding.

While the park appears relatively clean and well-maintained, there were some concerns expressed by the Business Improvement District as well as by the CPC. The fixtures in the Circle, especially the ring lighting, are seen as vulnerable to damage and expensive to repair or replace. The park also appears to invite skateboarders. Some see it as a problem, while others believe it is just part of the urban mix.

TABLE 1 COLUMBUS CIRCLE OPERATIONS BUDGET

DECEMBER 6, 2006

Staffing		\$220,000
	Number	% Time
Zone Gardner:	1	100%
Grounds Technician:	2	100%
Seasonal Grounds Technician:	1	100%
Fountain Technician:	1	50%
Materials and Supply		\$32,000
Uniforms		
Garbage Bags		
Hand Tools and Disposables		
Site Materials Supply		
Contracted Services		\$245,500
Irrigation Service		\$5,500
Lighting Service		\$120,000
Fountain Service		\$70,000
Landscape Planting		\$50,000
Total:		\$497,500

NEIGHBORHOOD IMPACTS

The Circle is back as “the center of Manhattan.” It is now both a destination and a vista that organizes districts above and below it. Claims of it increasing property value while it sits in the shadow of the billion-dollar developments of the Time Warner Center, the Trump Hotel, and on the corner of Central Park would be difficult to quantify. Even so, it is clear that symbolically, socially, culturally, and programmatically Columbus Circle makes a difference in the urban landscape. Traffic moves more smoothly than in any time in recent history, and the circle itself provides a pleasant urban space that never existed at that site before.

TABLE 2 FINANCES

TABLE 2 FINANCES	
SOURCES	
City of New York	\$ 21,300,000
NYC Transit Authority	\$ 1,200,000
Related Companies and Apollo Real Estate*	\$ 1,000,000
Total Development Costs	\$ 23,500,000

* (\$500,000 of the Related Companies and Apollo Real Estate were partial payment for design fees from the Olin Partnership, and the other \$500,000 supported the design and construction of the fountains by WET Design.)



Photo: Olin Partnership

Assessing Project Success

SUCCESS IN MEETING PROJECT GOALS

1. *To establish the Circle as a significant and unique asset to the public realm of New York City.*

The Circle is a safe haven in a congested intersection and serves as a small park in the best traditions of places in New York, such as Paley Park. The fountain noise muffles the traffic noise without being the center of attention, and the berm provides visual enclosure and protection even while there is good visibility into and out of the park.

2. *To reconstruct Columbus Circle as a transportation resource and maintain its ability to move 60,000 cars per day through a complex intersection during construction.*

Children enjoying the fountain.

Full-scale modeling of the intersection and rotary prior to final construction revealed that it works very well. Video analysis of the traffic both during and after construction by Habib Associates has convinced the firm that the approach to traffic control addresses the initial concerns about safety expressed by the risk-averse NYC Department of Transportation.

3. To improve pedestrian circulation to the facilities and spaces that surround the Circle.

The same video analysis reveals the system of intermediate stations at two of the three entry points to the circle is successful en route to the circle center. They are easy to navigate.

4. To make a beautiful and eye-catching place that is easy to maintain and keep clean, and safe.

The circle is a dramatic form, understandable from all perspectives at eye level, and it is very dramatic from the floors above ground in the structures surrounding it. While the surface is easy to maintain, the lighting fixtures (especially the circular liquid crystal display lights that follow the circle of the benches and also the berm) are fragile and expensive to maintain. The general planting maintenance and trash pick-up is getting good, but not great, attention until the Central Park Conservancy can find a dedicated source of revenue to cover the maintenance and operations costs.



Photo: Olin Partnership

5. To integrate all of the above in a manner that respects the role of the Circle as a setting for the monument to Columbus, as the Merchants' Gate entrance to Central Park, and as a critical connector between Mid-town and Up-town Manhattan.

The monument has never had a better setting in its history. While it has been the key vista for the traffic on streets entering the intersection, it has never been really approachable as a good place to sit and enjoy the city. Now it is both looked at from afar and approached up close to be better understood and actually used.

Night view of Columbus Circle Plaza.

SELECTION COMMITTEE COMMENTS

The Selection Committee lauded the design of Columbus Circle for completing the redefinition of an important but failing New York City public space. The designers, they felt, did a great job of cleaning up and re-creating a space that had essentially no pedestrian function into an attractive and enticing place. They felt that the Columbus Circle redesign showed the appropriate governmental role and response to private development in creating the infrastructure and public spaces that helps the rest to be better. While the lack of focus on maintenance budgets is a problem, it is one that is easily addressable in the future. The committee was impressed by the design process through which this apparently simple space was the result of a complex set of needs and interactions between the below grade infrastructure, traffic circle design, and pedestrian requirements. The resulting design handles traffic better than ever before and provides a new and elegant pedestrian space.

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